

Between Duty and Heart

by Hystericaled

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Summary: Mio has never failed any mission assigned to her, and does not intend to start anytime soon. But that was before she met Saito. Faced with temptation as strong as this, Mio fears her own emotions for the stoic man as much as it exhilarates her. But when the day of reckoning dawns, between what duty demands and what her heart tell her she must do, a choice must be made. SaitoxOC

1. Spinning The Web

****A/N:** ******So, I've been absolutely smitten with Hakuouki, and Saito happens to be one of my favorite characters~! Which is apparently reason enough for me to procrastinate on my studies to write this fic. I really should set my priorities straight. :x Anyway, I hope that you will find this story enjoyable~! :)

(Content rating may be subjected to change.)

****Disclaimer:** I do not own Hakuouki or any of it's characters. (I'll only post this once)******

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><p>Near the back door of the Ikedaya inn, Harada's breath was coming out in short puffs and sweat streaked his neck. His muscle tensed and his face was one of concentration as he shoved a Choshu spy off the end of his spear before spinning around and knocking another unconscious with the blunt side of his weapon.<p>

The captains may have the skills and stamina that rival tens of men, and they do enjoy the occasional fight from time to time, but against such odds, Harada thought that this was one day he would rather have passed peacefully.

"Are these all there is?"

Beside Harada, a man crumpled to the ground, a large gash on his neck as Saito sheathed his katana. "It would appear so."

Saito looked around with grim satisfaction. The people left standing were all men wearing the white and blue haori. The spies were either lying on the ground, bloodied and lifeless, or cowering in a group, having chose to surrender instead.

His eyes shifted to the wooden floor of the inn, the color now ominous and dark, drenched in the blood of many men.

A few of the bodies littering the stained floor donned a similar attire as he.

Saito reached out to close the eyes of a soldier.

While Shinsengumi may have been victorious, it is not without casualties. But, the efforts of their fallen comrades will be honored and not left in vain. Saito's lips thinned as he stood up. That, he will make sure of.

Following the retreating back of Harada, they both made their towards the collective group of Shinsengumi soldiers gathering outside the inn.

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Chizuru watched as the men slowly trickled out. Even from outside the inn, the metallic stink and smell of blood still reached her, and she could not help but feel a twinge of sorrow.

Those injured were supported by their friends, the casualties who died in line of work were carried out on stretchers and the spies, they were shoved into a group.

The air was somber and heavy, as is her heart. They had won, but there was little to rejoice for as two of the captains lay on stretchers, their immobility a testament to the extent of the dreadful injuries.

Standing a little further from the group, Chizuru could sense, could almost see the tension in the air. Everyone was still tense and ready for action as some went to scout the inn for any possible Choshu survivors.

Then, it happened.

A movement in the shadows in the outskirts of the Ikedaya inn, one that caught Chizuru's eye.

It was by the shop house beside the inn, situated a small distance away, but with everyone still tense from battle and with the threat of some remainders of the spies still present, the nearest soldier did not think twice.

But those aren't the spies, they aren't the enemy, Chizuru thought, her eyes widening in horror as the soldier swung his blade, sword arcing through the air even as Chizuru screamed for him to stop.

By then, red had already stained his blade a darker crimson, the

sickening sound of the slicing of flesh and splattering of blood reverberating in her ears.

Two bodies fell onto the ground with a thud, life lost from their eyes even before they hit the ground.

The man and woman were dressed in civilian garb, frightened expression still etched on their faces. A bundle rolled from the man's hand and some of the contents spilled out as the knot came undone.

Three identification passes for one man and two women. Some change of clothes. A couple of strings of coins.

Chizuru heard Shinpachi utter a low curse.

Commoners. They were commoners.

She looked to Saito, eyes silently pleading, and when he gave Chizuru a nod, the girl rushed to their side instantly.

Her deft hands pulled back their sleeves, fingers checking for their pulse.

But there were none.

Tears fell from her eyes, hands balling into small fists as Chizuru could not hold them back. So many lives, all gone so quickly.

As she sobbed quietly, a hand squeezed her shoulder, as if in comfort.

She looked up to see Saito, and she would have thanked him too, except that he was not looking at her.

"Stand back," Saito murmured to her as he rested his hand on the hilt of his katana.

"Show yourself." He addressed the shadows.

From the darkness, a girl of around Chizuru's age stepped forward hesitantly, her green eyes wide with fear, hands clutching a small bundle. Her hair was pulled up into a common hair bun, a few loose strands of hair framing her face.

"I was just looking for my parents." She stammered as her legs visibly quaked, gaze darting from the face of soldier to soldier, before coming to rest on Saito's katana. "Please don't kill me. I didn't see anything, really. I swear, my parents told me that they would be waiting here."

She stopped short when she saw the bodies beside Chizuru. Her hands flew to her mouth, the bundle falling to the ground, but even that was not able to muffle her gasp.

"Mother...? Father?" The soldiers parted hastily as she made her way towards the bodies, her slow and unsure gait giving way to a hurried rush as she threw herself on to her knees beside the couple.

Chizuru watched as the girl hesitantly reached out to the dark patch staining the clothes of her parents, watched as she saw a myriad of emotions -fear, sorrow, anger- flash in the eyes of the girl looking at the red staining her own trembling fingers. The puddle of blood on the ground spread, and they seeped through the girl's kimono from where she was kneeling. The cloth soaked in the blood, a dark stain spreading and spreading, but the girl seemed far too gone to notice.

On Saito's whispered command, someone picked up the identification passes that had fallen out from the man's bundle. The soldier inspected it, before giving Saito a nod.

Standing beside the indigo-haired man, Shinpachi grimaced.

Chizuru shared the same sentiment. It would have been much better if she were not a match.

"Hey, young lady, you may want to calm down for-" Shipachi's voice was gentle as he approached her, but that did not stop the fierce interruption he received.

Something seem to snap within her as the girl whipped her head around to pin Shinpachi with a glare.

"_Calm down?_ You want me to calm down?!" Angry tears were streaking down her face, fear forgotten as the girl made no effort to 'calm down', as Shinpachi suggested. "You guys _killed_ my parents! How do you expect me to calm down?!"

Her hands clenched at her sides. "They were not even a threat. They were just waiting for me, and they deserve to die because of that?!"

"Hey now. No one said that they deserved to die," Shinpachi said uneasily. "It was just an accident-"

A mirthless laugh -bordering on hysterical- escape her lips. "An accident? Is that what the Shinshengumi do, write things off as an accident?"

As she continued, an expression of scorn crossed her face. "If that is so, then you guys do not deserve, nor do you have the honor fitting to wear the haori that rest on your shoulders."

Anger sparked in Shinpachi's eyes at the insult, the tiredness he felt from the fight before doing nothing to aid the situation, but just as he was about to retort, Saito stepped in between them.

"Shinpachi, stop. And you, young lady, hard as it is, I would like you to compose yourself."

She looked as if she was about to argue but thought better of it, settling for glaring darkly at the ground, even as tears still fell from her eyes.

Saito told the rest of the soldiers to return to their positions, before turning back to her.

"Are you ready to answer some questions?" His voice was cool and neutral, neither kind nor angry.

She gave a short nod.

"What is your name?"

"Hayashi Mio."

"Why would a family of three be out so late?"

"We-" Mio's voice wavered a little at the mention of her parents. She brought up her sleeve, dabbing some tears away, before taking a deep breath and continuing. "We were supposed to leave for Kobe. Father had gotten a good price for a house there, and we had planned to move over today. But we took too long closing Father's shop. The landlord would not allow us another night, saying that our lease have already expired, so we had to move out, even though it was already so late in the night."

"You were not there with your parents, why?"

"On our way here, I realized that I forgot to take my possessions before we left the shop, so I had to retrieve the keys from the landlord. My parents were supposed to meet me here, but when I returned...they were...they-" Mio hiccuped a little as she could not bring herself to continue.

"Hayashi-san?" Chizuru stepped forward. "Do you have any relatives or friends?"

Mio sniffed, as she shook her head.

A look of contemplation crossed Chizuru's face, before she turned to Shinpachi. "Umm...would it be too much to ask if we let her stay on the compound?"

"What?" A look of incredulity crossed his expression.

Chizuru pressed on. "But she has no place to stay! And her only family is now gone because of us! Please, at least let her stay the night."

Shinpachi scratched his head. "Well, when you put it that way..."

"That is a possible solution." Chizuru eyes lit up as Satiou continued. "Shinpachi and I will report to Hijikata. Chizuru, stay with the girl."

Chizuru nodded earnestly, giving them a bow. "Yes, I will. Thank you!"

Without another word, Saito turned and walked towards the streets where Hijikata was holding off Aizu's ill-prepared soldier, with Shinpachi trailing behind him.

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Hijikata frowned as he thought over what Saito had just told him.

"Did she have any identification? Choshu must have known that we would turn up, I'd not be surprised if they had laid a trap in case they failed. She may be a spy."

Shinpachi gave an apologetic smile. "No chance, that dead man had her identification. She is his daughter alright."

The vice-commander sighed. It was already a risk to have Chizuru in their headquarters, and to add one more girl...

"Isn't there anybody we can send the girl off to? Friends? Relatives?"

Saito shook his head. "She did mention that there were none. Furthermore, the reputation that Shinsengumi have among the people is not exactly good. I do not see why she have reason to lie, unless of course, she is a spy. But there is lack of evidence to decide that."

Hijikata's brow creased as he thought for a while. "We will let her stay the night. I believe you mentioned that Okita and Heisuke was seriously injured? Until they are well enough to attend a meeting with the rest of the captains, the girl gets to stay. "

He shot the Aizu's clan captain a nasty look, as he further instructed Saito and Shinpachi. "If that is all, return and clear out. I don't want Aizu to get suspicious about anything."

"Understood." Saito murmured.

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"What?!" Mio's cry of outrage cut clearly through the still air. "No, I absolutely refuse! Why should I return with you?"

Shinpachi scowled at her. "Be grateful that we are offering you this much hospitality. We could simply close the matter with a slice of my sword."

Mio paled and she backed away instantly, a look of pure terror crossing her face.

"Shinpachi." Disapproval of his comrade's insensitive remark was evident in Saito's tone.

Harada, who had been watching from the sidelines let out a sigh of frustration. They had screwed up. Big time. "Well," he said, drawing attention to himself. "Why don't we table this discussion for tomorrow? And Shinpachi, just because you are tired and cranky from the fight does not mean you can bully a lady."

Ignoring the soft grumblings of his friend, Harada looked to Mio and gave her a soft apologetic smile. "I cannot emphasize how sorry we are that something like this had to happen. It was truly an accident. Our men were on edge from the fight, and your parents were just...in a rather unfortunate position."

He stooped down, taking up the girl's bundle of possession that was left forgotten on the ground, knotting it close before handing it

back to her.

"Since we are all tired and you have no place to stay, I think it would be best if you return with us to our headquarters. It would not do well to leave a pretty lady such as yourself wandering the streets alone at night."

Beside him, Chizuru smiled warmly. "Don't worry, you can share a room with me."

Grasping Mio's hand, she gave her a soft, reassuring squeeze.

"It'll be fine," Chizuru whispered.

"That's what they all say, isn't it?"

Chizuru looked away uneasily, before Mio gave a short, sad laugh. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to put you in a spot. It was not your fault."

There was a slight pause, before she spoke again. "I don't believe I've asked your name."

"Yukimura Chizuru. But you can just call me Chizuru."

Mio returned the squeeze, a small smile on her lips. "Chizuru...that's a beautiful name. Thanks, Chizuru."

Soon, both girls followed the soldiers as the men moved out of the Ikedaya Inn to head back to the headquarters, giving way for Aizu clan to do the necessary clean up.

In the dark cover of the early dawn, no one caught the small smirk playing on Mio's face.

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><p>She leapt, hands reaching to grasp the overhanging roof before pulling herself up and over the wall separating the Araki clan's compound from the outside world.

Her wooden clogs landed with a soft tap, the elaborate kimono she was wearing rustling slightly as they stiffly fell back into place. There was a slight pause as she controlled her breathing, the only indication that she was not part of the wall being the small puffs of breath in the cold, made visible by the moon.

The air was still and undisturbed, all except for the call of the night insects, as they should be.

Metal glinted silver in the moonlight as something hissed through the air the moment she made to move away from the wall, and that was all the warning she got of the sudden attack.

Dodging the blade swiftly, she drew her own short dagger from within the folds of her kimono and parried the next strike, not giving the attacker any moment of rest as she followed up with a vicious elbow to the face.

_Her attacker backed away clumsily, barely avoiding her

blow._

"Wait wait wait!" A familiar voice called out, ending with a shout as Mio swept his feet from under him.

"Crap, you knew it was me, why did you have to go all out?" Yataro groaned as he picked himself off the ground, massaging his sore bottom.

"All out?" Mio's unaffected look was only betrayed by the amusement within her eyes. "If I did, you'd be dead by now."

"Oh? I don't think so."

"Care to try?"

"Well, I'd rather try your services as a geiko. I hear that you have been making quite the name for yourself haven't you, Umeha? The 'wandering willow of the flower towns'. You should hear the rumors going on about the mysterious willow at the inns I've been to. There is quite the number of your suitors out there."

"Mio sighed. "Stop that. You know I only use that name when I'm in need of the geiko facade."

"Yataro laughed. "Father told you to keep to a low profile, but both your alias ended up being famous, or infamous as you see it. So, which poor man did Umeha swindle information from tonight?"

"Nakao Hiroji. Araki had found his recent actions suspicious, and he wanted me to find out what he was up to."

"And?"

"Nakao is considering defecting to Tokugawa's side, apparently," Mio said as she made her way towards the dark corridors leading to the training hall.

"Yataro gave a low whistle as he fell in step beside her. "Father isn't going to like this."

"And Araki would not like it indeed, Mio mused.

"From the time he took her in when she was six years old, she had learned that the man had been nothing but manipulative and cunning. Everyone served a purpose. All soldiers are pawns on his chessboard where he reigned king. And she, he'd told her once, was his knight. A spare one that no one knew of, a wild card to change the tides should the need arise.

"Because, no one would expect a girl to be able to fight.

"Perhaps Father may ask you to assassinate him," Yataro grinned. "Looks like the Phantom is going to strike soon, hey?"

"Mio chuckled. "Is that what they have been calling me these days? My last kill was quite some while ago, surely the commotion must have died down."

_"After you killed that high-ranking Choshu officer, people started

to notice that the modus operandi of the assassin was rather similar to a few other unsolved murders. That was around the time that the feudal lords started to get their samurais to compile a file of possible related incidents, and they decided to dub you as Phantom." Yataro stopped as they reached the sliding doors of the training hall._

"What can I say? Acting as a geiko and my job as a hired assassin, a girl's got to earn her keep around here." Mio replied as she straighten her kimono.

Turning towards the doors, she raised her voice slightly. "It's Mio. I've returned."

"Come in." A rough voice called out from within and both Yataro and Mio complied.

_Araki was standing in the middle of the dimly lit hall, a few dying candles flickering as they slid the door close. He reached for a cloth, wiping his sweat down before nodding to Mio.
"Report."_

Sinking to one knee, Mio bowed as Yataro stood to the side of Araki. "Araki-sama. Nakao Hiroji have mentioned that he is considering the possibility of allying himself with the Tokugawa. He has cited the growing power of the Shogunate as the reason, and have plans to offer the provision of funds to the Shogunate to ease his switching of sides and as a display of loyalty."

A small crease formed on Araki's brow. "It is impossible for him to be so brash without any prompting. There is something that must have convinced him reasonably. Did he mention anything else?"

Mio paused. Nakao was rather tipsy when she subtly angled their conversation in her preferred direction, so his words were rather slurred. But she remembered that he was going on rather incoherently about something...

'...Umeha dear, you really should leave with me. Even the stray curs are asking me over...'

'... you don't need to worry your pretty little head anymore. We can stay safe from the war under the wings of the Shogun. Those damn mibu wolves may be low in intellect, but they are quite a force to be reckoned with...'

"He mentioned that some people were seeking his assistance. The 'mibu wolves', he had said."

Araki's frown deepened.

Mio glanced in askance towards Yataro, and the man scowled. "The wolves of mibu. They are a fraction of the Tokugawa's force that governs over Kyoto, going by the name of Shinsengumi. We've encountered some trouble from them previously. Word of mouth has it that the Shinsengumi's captains are undefeated, and this would not be the first time that we have had trouble caused by them. It seems that our plans for Nakao to fund the Araki clan in preparation for a clash against the Choshu is for naught."

"Irrelevant." Araki interrupted Yataro. "His part in my plans are but one of minor issue. I can easily find another person to take his role. But it would be foolish to let the Shinsengumi go unchecked..."

He turned his piercing grey eyes on her, and Mio had to make an effort not to look away, even as a shiver crawled down her spine. She never really did like her benefactor, not even after she took up his family name and been in his service ever since he took her in.

"Hijikata Toshio. Have you heard of this name?"

"I do not believe so."

"The vice-captain of the Shinsengumi. He is the stronghold of the group, together with his fellow captains. It would only be a matter of time before they pose to be more than a mild problem."

There was a pause as he considered something, his eyes looking out of the windows, the gears in his mind working away.

"Mio, I have a mission for you. Infiltrate the Shinsengumi. I want a routine report of their plans and operations. You can figure out with Yataro on how to send me the information."

Mio's eyes widened. Surely not! She may know her way with the sword, but sitting among seasoned samurais with so much more raw power than her did not settle well with Mio.

Just one wrong move, and she'd be dead.

"Araki-sama, with all due respect, this is a mission that I am unsuited for. A fraction of the Tokugawa forces like Shinsengumi would most definitely only admit recruits, and would have no use of a female within their walls. Furthermore, my forte does not lie with a long drawn out mission like this."

"Then create a reason for them to take you in. All the soldiers that I can trust with this mission have too high a probability of slipping up. Only you are most suited for this."

"But..."

Araki's eyes hardened. "There will be no more discussion of this matter! It's final. Scout out the place before you make your move. Go over with Yataro on what you require and see that you have everything you need. I hear that they are stepping up on patrols and checks. Ensure that your false identification pass is made and have it with you at all times. I don't take kindly to failures."

"Also, before you leave, clear up the mess of Nakao. You know what to do."

Nakao have shown doubts in his relation between the clan. Mio knew that Araki would want to make sure that he would not spill any of their plans.

After all, the dead do not speak.

Gritting her teeth in anger, she barely managed keep the bite out of her voice. "I understand."

With that, Araki turned his back on her and walked away. But just as he was about to exit, he looked over his shoulders at Mio. "When the time comes that the Shinsengumi poses too much of a hindrance to my clan or our current allies, the Satsuma clan, I'll send a messenger. Then, you can complete the final phase of this mission, one that is of your forte."

"Which is?" Mio asked, although she could already guess the answer.

"To assassinate them."

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><p>So, how was it? Did you guys like Mio? LOL, not that there is much to say so early in the story. Well, if there are any parts you find lacking, please feel free to tell me! :)<p>

Reviews and comments are love~! :D

2. Seeds of Temptation

A/N: Many thanks to fallingwisteria for the really _really_ helpful comments, and kudos to onlyheavenknows for being the first reviewer~! :)

Hope that you'll enjoy this chapter! :D

Thanks for the reviews, alerts and favorites!

* * *

><p>"Hayashi-san."<p>

When she did not turn around, Chizuru called out to her a second time and waited for the girl to respond.

But Mio continued walking as if she had not heard her.

Chizuru turned to look over to Harada, and he shrugged. Obviously it was not a matter of Chizuru's voice being too soft.

When the third call failed to get the girl's attention, Chizuru caught up with Mio and pulled lightly on the sleeve of her kimono.

Upon feeling a slight tug on her clothes Mio moved reflexively, snatching her arm away in an instant.

Sea-green eyes flashed as they took on a deadly glint, years of honed skills and inbred instincts dictating Mio's movements when among enemy ranks. Her body tensed and muscles coiled, all senses on the alert as she readied for a fight.

Her fingers had started to close around a sharp metal hairpin hidden under a fold of her kimono when she noticed that the girl who was

dressed like a boy was looking at her with a worried expression.

"Are you alright, Hayashi-san? I called you several times, but you did not reply."

Mio stared at her rather dumbly. "You called me? But I only heard you calling someone named Haya-"

Shit!

Mio bit her own tongue and clamped her mouth shut before she completed the sentence.

A spike of fear shot through her as she chanced a look around.

Did they catch on to her?

Was someone going to lop her head off when she fail to escape the army just because she was armed with only a stupid hairpin? (Though it was sharp enough to take out a few people's eye, that she was sure of.)

Instead of the envisioned platoon of Shinsengumi soldiers rushing to kill her after someone called on her bluff, she was faced with Chizuru and Harada waiting patiently for her to finish her sentence, none the wiser that Mio had almost blew her own cover and signed her own death wish.

Mio mentally cursed Araki.

For around eleven years of her life, she have been dutifully responding to the name of 'Araki Mio', having taken up her benefactor's surname. Conditioning herself to respond to another family name required time. Time that Mio did not have, not with Araki constantly breathing down her neck and asking her to set off on her mission as soon as possible.

"Maybe she is still in shock." Mio heard Harada tell Chizuru, and she heaved a sigh of relief, letting out the breath she did not know she was holding.

That was close. _Too close._

"I'm sorry," Mio said, arranging a rather crestfallen expression on her face. "It is just that, so much have happened today..."

She let her voice waver before trailing off and predictably, Chizuru rubbed her back in circular motions, small hands trying to sooth her. "Don't worry, we'll work things out. When we get back to the compound, I'll make you a cup of tea before you sleep."

Harada gave her an encouraging smile. "You'll feel better. Chizuru make the best tea around here."

Mio gave a small nod, felt her lips form a smile with practiced ease, and with that, the three of them picked up their pace to catch up with the soldiers.

As they continued their way towards the Shinsengumi headquarters,

Chizuru and Harada made small talk about the weather in the recent days.

Only then did Mio let her fingers unclench from around the metal hairpin.

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When they arrived, Mio was instantly escorted to a room by one of the Shinsengumi captains on the vice-commander's order.

The captain assigned to her beckoned, and obediently, she followed his retreating back through the dark.

Mio was led through corridors, a number of which she had somewhat familiarized herself with from afar, what with after a few days of rather rushed and haphazard information scouting for her mission.

Still, she let her eyes roam around, silently taking mental notes of where some doors led and where the shortest paths to the exits were probably located, her mind already working out a sketchy mental map of the Shinsengumi's headquarters.

The compound was relatively small compared to the sprawling estate the Araki clan owned, but from what she had seen during her scouting, it looked homey with a lavish backyard that housed a large sakura tree in mid-blossom.

But now, rather than homey, it felt suffocating.

A small place caging her in, with potential predators round every corner with every step and turn she took.

If the Shinsengumi did not kill her first, perhaps her own paranoia will, Mio thought sullenly.

As the door of the room she just entered slid close, a soft thud with an unpleasant air of finality to it, the dark and overcast expression she wore was one that Mio did not have to act out.

Her 'escort' moved across the room as she settled herself down in a corner, and there was a slight rustle before a match was ignited and a candle lit, and he rested himself by the door, eyes seemingly looking at nothing in particular.

And for the first time, Mio got a good look at the first Shinsengumi captain she had seen that night.

For what was about to happen, Mio had a very very good reason.

Because, from what Mio had gathered under the guise of Umeha, the Shinsengumi were a rather notorious bunch, and there were numerous inflated -and rather creative- rumors of the captains, mostly centered about their heartlessness and cruelty to the commoners and everyone alike.

One of the regular geikos at Shimabara had told Mio -in a rather conspiratorial whisper- that the Shinsengumi captains ate newborns

for breakfast.

("Alive!" The geiko exclaimed, her eyes wide with fear and what must have been an unhealthy portion exaggeration. The make up she wore only served to make her expression all the more grotesque, and Mio had to fight to contain her laughter._)

Someone else mentioned that Hijikata Toshizo -the famous (or rather, _infamous_) vice-commander of Shinsengumi- bathed his hair in virgin's blood on the night of every full moon.

("_How do you think a monstrous demon like him manage to get such nice hair," a pompous and well-rounded woman had asked her obnoxiously._)

Going by other rumors she heard, every room in the Shinsengumi compound was supposed to be adorned with the skulls of people that they had killed, and those that did not manage to get a place on the wall -there was an excess of skulls, she was assured- was used to brew soup.

("_These are all facts, my dear, we don't deal with petty rumors around here. The Shinsengumi are nasty business. Stay away from them," they would tell Mio before proceeding to scare their children into helping with the housework. "Or the Shinsengumi will steal you away in the dead of the night!"_)

It was at that moment that Mio decided that it was probably useless to rely on the public's information. Especially not with the twisted and skewed image majority of the commoners had of the Shinsengumi.

So, Mio had moved on to the next phase: scouting the place and people out by herself.

But the compound was well guarded, the guards so ridiculously on time that, for once, Mio wished they would just let loose a little. Which was a stark contrast to what she had coldly warned the Araki clan's soldiers, the threat of incurring Araki's wrath hovering above their heads should they even miss their routine by a second.

Hence, even with her skills and expertise in stealth missions, she had only managed a few precious and rather blurry glimpse of the compound.

Her other plan to evaluate them up close was thwarted too, when she realized that with everybody scrambling to get out of the Shinsengumi's way when they are patrolling the streets, she would raise suspicion if she does not do the same, and that was not something she could compromise on.

So, the only information she had on them are rather combat related and courtesy of Yataro.

Hijikata Toshizo uses a sword, Okita Souji utilizes a katana and operates under the style of Tennen Risshin, Harada Sanosuke favors a spear...

Well, she had known that Saito was the captain who had asked her to step out from within the shadows, and she had already identified him

from the start.

After all, he was the only one among the captains who wore his katana on the right, a small tidbit Yataro had told her.

However, all through the time from when they had met till when Hijikata -his identity made obvious as people waited to follow his commands- asked Saito to bring her to the room, there was minimal if any light at all. So Mio could not identify with his features, having never seen him before.

Now, as Mio took in the sight of the person before her, she found herself incapable of cognitive and intellectual faculties, a small part of her mind left to vaguely wonder why the rumors never did mention the ethereal beauty of the man in front of her.

Safe to say that for all that she have known and gathered about Shinsengumi, nothing was able to prepare her for the visual impact -with all the force of a direct punch to her gut- when she saw Saito Hajime.

He was...

"Beautiful..." Her voice was hardly above a whisper.

In the light of the candle, Mio was able to notice that he wore a black kimono suited for combat, accompanied with a simple white sash and scarf, under the trademark blue and white haori he have yet to shed. But underneath, she knew, was a lethal and dangerous body, all lithe and coiled muscle making him a lean fighting machine, as she had witnessed first-hand in the shadows during the fight at Ikedaya Inn.

His hair was indigo, tied in a loose side-ponytail and draped over his right shoulder, the color so dark, holding echos of moonless nights and vivid passion. His long fringe hid part of the right side of his face, framing the sharp angles, and Mio had to curl her fingers to stop herself from reaching out to run her fingers through them.

But what really enraptured her were his eyes.

His eyes were of such pure, undiluted deep ocean blue it was as if a heavenly artist crushed sapphire into his paints and then colored in the irises with the finest brush.

"Did you say something?" He spoke, and Mio felt the low and rich baritone voice like velvet, soft and smooth against her skin.

It took her awhile to register that Saito had spoken to her.

"Huh- Whu- I mean, yes?" Mio spluttered, eyes darting down to her own hands resting on her thighs, her cheeks coloring as the possibility that he had caught her staring dawned on her. She stole a glance up and felt a slight relief as he simply looked on at her questioningly.

"I asked, if you had said something. I did not quite seem to catch what you said a moment ago."

"I- It's nothing."

And that was the end of the conversation, as he turned, looking at the flickering flame of the candle, while Mio's eyes appreciated the way the dancing shadows accentuated his features.

He was beautiful, yes, but his was a beauty of a warrior.

Which just happens to be the kind of guys that make her weak in her knees.

Too bad he was on the opposing side.

* * *

><p>The first official interaction between Mio and Saito! So, how was it?<p>

Reviews are love~! :D

3. Ghosts of The Past

****A/N: ****I want to start off with thanking ****fallingwisteria****. To have gotten an amazing reader such as yourself, I must at least be doing something right. Many thanks, dear girl, because it your comments that really keeps me going!

This chapter is rather Mio-centric and is necessary for the story development, but the next would focus more on the Shinsengumi members, so fret not!

****Thanks for the reviews, alerts and favorites!****

* * *

><p>The door slid open and Mio's eyes darted to it, only relaxing when Chizuru stepped in. The girl was making good on her promise, her hands laden with a nondescript brown tray bearing two steaming cups of tea.<p>

She let out a mental sigh of relief. That was smart, really smart, Mio. Continue to be this jumpy and it would be such a wonder if they do not have your head on a platter by the next dawn.

Unbeknown to her, near the doorway, Saito did not miss slight tension on the girl's face, hinted only by the minute frown she wore.

Many thought he was silent to a fault but in exchange, Saito tends to be more perceptive than most. And this girl, Saito noticed, this Hayashi Mio, she was afraid. He did not blame her, knowing the reputation that the Shinsengumi held among the commoners.

Still, it was not within his duty to worry about that. And with Chizuru here, his job was done, so he saw no point in remaining in the room any longer.

Mio was just accepting a cup of tea from Chizuru when Saito stood up, leaning over slightly as he whispered something into Chizuru's ear.

Chizuru nodded and Saito simply walked out, not sparing Mio a second glance.

Well, he is quite the talkative one is he not.

"Is he always like that?" Mio asked Chizuru as she sip the hot tea slowly, nodding at the door the Shinsengumi captain just went through.

"Eh? Do you mean Saito-san?"

Mio nodded.

Chizuru thought for a while, taking a small sip of her own tea before answering. "He tends not to talk much, but he is a pretty nice guy."

Mio almost choked.

Pretty nice guy. That was a first. Never before have she heard anyone complimenting the Shinsengumi. The comments were usually along the lines of "heartless bastards" and, if the people were feeling particularly generous, "cotton-headed monkeys".

Mio understood their fears. She understood why they, the Shinsengumi, were shunned, as they _should_ be. The Shinsengumi were under the rule of the Tokugawa. That, in itself, was reason enough. After all, she had seen for herself what cruelty Shogunate's soldier were capable of. What is to say that Shinsengumi would be any different?

Her green eyes hardened, and it must have shown because Chizuru was looking at her with an apprehensive look on her face.

"I know that I am in no place to tell you this but..." Chizuru trailed off before pushing on in a stronger voice. "But the Shinsengumi really are good people. What happened is unfortunate, but they really had no ill intentions!"

Mio felt her lips twist into a familiar bitter smile, long forgotten dark emotions washing over her with surprising ease. "'Good people', huh... I'm sorry Chizuru, but I doubt it." And somewhere in there, Mio knew, was Araki Mio speaking.

Not the fabricated 'Hayashi Mio' but the real Araki Mio, who lost her family to the Shogunate forces eleven years ago.

She pushed that memory to the furthest depths of her mind, burying the ghosts of her past. Focus. She have to focus on the mission at hand. She have not thought about it for many years. Why should she now?

And come to think of it... What is a girl like Chizuru doing among the company of these soldiers anyway? Mio gave her a quick once over while the girl was busy feeling uneasy and sipping her tea. And what she saw still did not change. Chizuru did not seem like a warrior woman, as young and fragile looking as she was, and she did not seem like a courtesan either.

Curious, Mio voiced her question to Chizuru, and the brown-haired girl's eyes widened in surprise as her cheeks colored. "You know I'm a girl?"

Mio gave her a sheepish grin. "Oops...Was it supposed to be a secret?"

Chizuru gave a defeated sigh, shoulders slumping a little. "I guess it must be really obvious, if even you can tell."

"So, why are you with them?"

"Ah, about that. I was looking for my father and-" She stopped all of a sudden, a guilty look on her face.

Well well well, what do you know. The Shinsengumi are quite the paranoid bunch aren't they.

"It's fine if you can't say. I understand. I would be suspicious of a stranger too."

Chizuru shook her head vehemently. "No, it is not that! I'm not in the position to say anything much yet."

Her hazel-brown eyes were wide, as if willing Mio to trust her, and Mio was taken aback at the raw emotions in the clear depths.

She have encountered many people in her life, her position in the Araki clan and job as a hired assassin leading her to meet all sorts of people with equally diverse -and disgusting, might she add- characters. But this was the first time Mio met someone like Chizuru.

She was like an open book, wearing her heart on her sleeve, and Mio was torn between wanting to shake Chizuru awake so that she could get a proper look at the world (not everything is as it seems, Chizuru dear) and wanting to thank the gods for her luck (at least there is always someone gullible enough to believe -and in turn, support- her when she spin her lies for the Shinsengumi).

Either this girl was speaking truth...or she was a very good actress.

Mio made a mental note to mind what she say to Chizuru. It would be so easy, oh-so-easy for her to get swept up in Chizuru's pace and let her guard down around this girl.

They made small talk, and soon, the futons were out and Chizuru's soft rhythmic breathing sounded next to her.

In the dark Mio sat up silently, pushing away her given blanket as she stood up. The cool air of the pre-summer season kissed her skin, her long black hair tumbling down now that they were released from the bun. Sweeping her hair over her shoulders, Mio walked soundlessly towards the door and was just about to slide it open, but halted herself in time.

She dropped to the ground, pressing her ear against the floor.

Fifteen minutes later, the soft muffled sound of footsteps approached and then stopped. There was a murmur of indistinguishable words before another set of footsteps, a heavier one this time, padded away.

Mio smirked. She wasn't Araki's spymaster for nothing. After scouting out so many places, she would recognize this anywhere.

The changing of shifts.

It was not enough that Chizuru slept in the same room as her, but they had to have her watched too.

As she said, Shinsengumi: paranoid.

Mio returned to her futon, a wry smile on her face as she laid down.

Then again, it does pay to be cautious, Mio thought, as she withdrew her metal hairpin from within the folds of her kimono and slipped it under her pillow.

* * *

><p>It was dark, all around her was an endless sea of nothingness. But she knew where she was. There was that oh so familiar scent. Of smoke and burnt wood, of ashes and dust. And slowly, the formless darkness started to take shape and colour, the scene before her flickering into existence. Suddenly, things slid into focus.

_The blood-red sunset color of the sky. _

The heavy footfalls.

The piercing scream of a woman.

* * *

><p>Mio jolted up instantly, fingers tight around her makeshift weapon, wild eyes darting around.<p>

There was the fire. And the soldiers and- _Ahh..._**crap**_._

She groaned, pulling up her knees and burying her face into her arms, hair casting a dark shadow over her features. That dream again. How many times must she re-live through that bloody thing. She had grown up. Surely they will fade in time, as all injuries do.

It was not like she was living in regret and have yet to carry out her revenge. Sure, she do not know who the soldiers were. But she had dealt the Shogunate quite a few severe blows when she took up some offers by the Choshuu and Satsuma clan to take some Shogunate bigwigs out of the political scene, and at the same time, off the face of the earth.

Mio ran her fingers through her tangled hair, grimacing a little as she tried to work through some stubborn knots. Her trashing in her sleep, she wondered if it had been quite the sight for Chizuru to see. Her sweat-drenched kimono clung to her skin uncomfortably and

she itched to peel them off. She was half considering doing just that -damn the consequences- when the door slid open.

She looked up, and her eyes met with that of a lazy ocean.

Saito glanced down at her, and was just on the verge of saying something, but his words got stuck in his throat, deep blue eyes widening slightly. His features reddened, ears taking on the faintest pink as he averted his eyes from her.

"Umm... Is something the matter...?" What Mio really wanted to know was if she should be prettying herself up. Because if they found her out and wanted to behead her, she wanted to at least go in style. But that would be after she make an attempt to escape and assuming that they manage to catch her, of course.

"N- Nothing." Saito still wasn't looking at her, and seemed to have taken to speaking to the door frame. Mio vaguely wondered if that was how they told people of the death sentences. Guilt too much to bear huh, Mister Tough Guy?

"A meeting will held to discuss your situation at the earliest time possible, and the commander will be requesting your presence. But due to some complications, it have to wait. Until then, you are to make yourself comfortable within the confines of this room. Chizuru will bring your meals here," Saito told the wooden structure.

And with that, he deftly stepped out and slid the door close again, leaving Mio to stare at the empty outline of where Saito once stood.

She frowned. Okay...what was that all about?

Then something slid further down her shoulder, and Mio looked down at herself. Her kimono was now hanging on precariously by only one of her shoulder, the other having already slid half-way off, the sash -most possibly loosened when she was trashing in her sleep- only giving the kimono more incentive to bare more of her pale skin.

Did she...did she just...

Mio wanted to bang her head against the wall. She totally did flash Saito.

And that was how Mio started her first official morning in the Shinsengumi compound.

* * *

><p>So as usual, if you have any comments, critique, or would just like to rant, feel free to drop a review!

4. There's Intoxication In The Air

****A/N: ****Apologies for the late update. Exams are in a few days, but apparently my procrastination on revision have manifested in me completing yet another chapter even though I've sworn off writing until exams are over. So it's an update for you guys! :) Oh, and Happy -belated- Halloween! Hope that you've enjoyed yourselves!

^^

****A few other things to note: ****I've changed something in the second chapter. An anonymous reviewer going by 'Guest' have kindly pointed out that Saitou wears his katana on his right, not left, and I've rectified it. Thanks a lot! :)

Also I've removed the rhymes in chapter three from the flashback. I debated with myself for a length of time before adding it, but it still sat uneasily with me like it doesn't belong there, so I've taken it down. If any of you have views regarding this, I'd love to hear it!

****In response to the reviews: ****(Normally, I'd reply reviewers via the inbox, but for those going anonymous, I hope you won't mind if I replied here.)

Guest: I'm glad that you have enjoyed the story so far and like the plot and Mio too! :) And thanks for pointing out that error I made. :p Yes, I had great fun writing and thinking up of the rumors, all the more so since it was actually a passing thought and not part of the plan! Hope that you'll enjoy this chapter~! :)

unknown: I'm happy to find someone else who finds Mio and her personality likable, and the plot interesting! The story isn't going to end anytime soon -if all things goes as planned- but here is the next chapter! :)

IT'S ME ANON: Or should I have put 'IT'S YOU ANON' instead? Haha, anyway bad jokes aside, yeah, Saitou is really beautiful. Like, lethally, excruciatingly beautiful, because let's not forget that he hails -together with Souji- as the captains with mosts kills to their name. And his softer side -shy, quiet and stern as you've so aptly phrased- yeah, I love it too. :) Well...I didn't really think in that manner, but Mio does come off as a Tsundere character doesn't she? Don't worry, she'll be softer, sweeter and kinder to Saitou -and everybody perhaps?- as the story goes. :p I'm really flattered that you find this fic interesting, and going so far to even say it's brilliant and beautifully written. I can only hope that this chapter does not disappoint! Thanks for loving the story, and (this is the internet, we love Saitou, so why the hell not?) love you too~!
:D

****fallingwisteria: ****I've already replied you through the inbox, but I would like to thank you again for taking time to leave your thoughts and insights. They made me think more in-depth than I usually would and are truly a great help! :)**
>

****Last but definitely NOT least, thanks for the reviews, alerts and favorites! You guys are awesome~!**
>

* * *

><p>Sunlight filtered through the thin material of the door, bathing the room in the pale glow of the morning sun. The room was just slightly warmer than usual as summer starts to mark her presence but already, Mio found it beyond stifling. The captains have yet to say anything and her nerves were already on the edge. It did not bode

well for Mio, since she needed all her wits to ensure her continued residence in the Shinsengumi compound -assuming that she survives.<p>

Mio was kneeling on the tatami floor of the meeting room, fingers on her lap lightly gripping the cloth of the plain brown kimono she was given to wear. She resolutely trained her eyes at a spot on the patterned floor, resisting her fight or flight instincts that were clamoring at her to _do something_.

Where was a katana when she needed one? In fact, Mio was so desperate she was even willing to make do with a dull kitchen knife instead of the pathetic hairpin holding up her hair. It had been a rather heated debate, with Yataro insisting that she not bring any weapons and her demanding that she had to at least arm herself. _He_ was not the one who had to stay with a group of seasoned warriors he was tasked to spy on and then assassinate when the time was ripe.

And people tend to, you know, react violently to her less than innocent intentions when they find out which end of the sword she intends to stick into them.

In the end they settled it amicably, finally agreeing -rather grudgingly on Mio's part- that she would always use two hairpins; one to actually hold her hair in place, and the other to substitute as an emergency weapon that would hopefully not be required. Right now, Mio viciously wished that Yataro was still nursing that black eye of his.

Just this morning, Chizuru had informed her that there was a meeting being held. It was welcomed news -even with the threat of death hanging over it- what with her being cooped up in the room for an entire week.

Mio had been kindly suggested -demanded- to not leave the room she shared with Chizuru, and she could not risk sneaking out when the more than capable captains were keeping a watch over her the entire time.

It had taken all her self-control over the seven days to not attempt in pitting her skills against theirs, to see if were they more perceptive, or was her stealth too much for them to handle. All it would take is one mistake, one slip, and she was sure that she would leave the place "in pieces. And Mio was not in any rush to find out if the Shinsengumi truly lived up to their blood drenched reputation by making an example out of herself.

Nevertheless, a mission was a mission and she would be unworthy of her position of spymaster if she balked at every small threat. Even though the Shinsengumi was anything but small. Even though she did not have enough time to prepare. Even though-

God, this isn't helping. And neither were the predatory gazes set on her.

Mio had played the role of a geiko before, and being scrutinized like a piece of meat that drunk perverted men could not wait to get their hands on was practically a permanent part of the job. But this, _this_ was a whole different game altogether. The Shinsengumi captains were hardly gazing at her with lustful eyes, and while Mio

was sure that they wanted to get their hands on her almost as much as the men at Shimabara does, she doubt that she would come out of this alive.

"So, this is the kid?" The captain with brown hair said, and her eyes darted up at the rhetorical question. Playful emerald regarded her and Mio did not like what she saw in the other's eyes â€"a cunning intelligence that was not hidden by his mischievous demeanor, not to her at least. This guy would be a challenge to deal with.

"Yes," Saito replied, voice level and cool. "She is the one we were discussing before."

Their eyes met for a brief moment, a slight contact, bottomless sapphire depths meeting a light forest green. Both hurriedly looked away at the same time. Heat suffused Mio's cheeks as the previous happening of when they were both alone flashed through her mind. There's nothing like an unintended and highly inappropriate flashing to make people overly self-conscious, apparently.

Well, isn't it hot today, Mio thought, even as a small voice within her devilishly pointed out that it have nothing to do with the temperature, and everything to do with that one man across the room. She stole a look, considering Saitou for a while. It did help that he was easy, _more than easy,_ on the eyes...

As quick as that thought came, Mio shot it down, amidst the protest of the devilish voice within that was always, _always_, responsible for urging her to tempt fate be it by testing Araki's patience or, as it is doing now, being attracted to one of her targets. Her job was hard enough as is. She definitely did not need to any sort of feelings and emotions thrown into the mix, Mio decided resolutely, stamping out the more irrational side of her thoughts.

The voice of the captain who had first spoken brought her attention back where it mattered most.

"Why don't we just kill her?" He said casually, as if he was discussing the weather and not the death of a girl whose parents they had killed. Mio almost choked on her saliva because, yeah, she knew that it'd be hard to get them to take her in, but she had never thought to be written off so fast.

"Now, now, Souji. Don't scare our guest." The man sitting beside Hijikata said, his voice kind, and smile warm. Then he turned to her. "I'm Kondo Isami, the commander of Shinsengumi. Don't worry about Souji, he means no harm. We are all sorry for what has happened to you."

Mio could tell that he meant it, and that was when she did a double take. This was the man -one who cut a kind fatherly picture in the midst of the captains and seemed really out of place- leading the Shinsengumi? Really? Where was the big-sized, gruff and rough barbarian that must surely be commandeering a notorious group such as this?

Her thoughts of incredulity must have shown on her face, because Kondo was looking at her with concern in his eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Y- Yes." Mio replied hurriedly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare, it's just thatâ€¦you are not what I imagine you to be." And with seven boring days and plenty of townsfolk's rumor to ponder on, she had imagined plenty indeed.

He gave a sheepish laugh. "I hear that a lot."

Kondo had been truthfully in feeling for her plight, she could tell that much, but with some of the guys in the room, she knew they felt anything but sorry. Like that bespectacled man who spoke next.

"I understand your concern, Kondo-san, but this place is not fit for a young woman." Politely said and properly phrased, but the look in his eyes was more calculating than worried about the feasibility of her living in the compound.

Mio jaw clenched. Predictable. They were warriors who worked under the Shogun, stupid, stupid, stupid of her to even expect them to give consideration even to one whose family they'd slain accidentally.

As if hearing her thoughts, Saito spoke up, deftly proving her wrong. "And yet there is nowhere else she can go."

Mio's eyes widened at this display of support, even as Harada nodded his head. "We are responsible for the blame after all." He looked at the other two captains beside him, and Nagakura and the boyish-looking captain voiced their agreed.

The younger man punched Nagakura on the shoulder playfully. "Well, Shinpachi just want another woman to look at!"

"That's not true! It's just that- how could we leave a lady out alone in the streets with no one to support herâ€¦ Heisuke, you little brat!" And then, a small scuffle promptly broke out right in front of Mio's unbelieving eyes.

She was used to order and rank, where rules are written and set in stone, and no one acted out of line. And here, this, this is the famed and feared Shinsengumi; kind and gullible commander and scuffling captains galoreâ€¦ Mio wondered if she was at the wrong compound or maybe, even the wrong province. Perhaps Shinsengumi was very common a name?

Hijikata scowled, frown deepening as he shouted at them to settle down and shooting them a final glare to nail in the message. "Act your age!" He barked.

There was a little more finger-pointing (and Mio had the vague feeling that she was watching two kids fight) before they quieted down, and Saitou spoke. "It would not be in our favor if word gets out that the Shinsengumi kill civilians without cause."

Hijikata looked towards the bespectacled man sitting across the room. "Sannan, I have my thoughts, but I want to hear what you think of this."

Sannan's eyebrows creased, fingers rubbing his chin in thoughtful consideration. "Yes, what Hajime-kun said is true. It would be counter-productive if we lose the good graces of the Aizu clan now, especially after all that we have done to secure the credit of the

Ikedaya Inn incidentâ€|"

Hijikata sighed. "And if Satsuma and Choshu get wind of this, they would blow things up, and our reputation with the townspeople is standing in the mud already. I can see where this is goingâ€|"

"You." Mio's spine stiffened as the piercing violet gaze of the vice-commander turned on her. "You will be kept under watch and will remain in your room at all times."

"But- " Mio started to say, yet Hijikata appeared to have no qualms on interrupting her. And as both Mio and Hijikata continued, the rest of the occupants in the room followed the back and forth conversation, although Mio seemed to hardly get anything in at all.

"-your meals will be brought to you and-"

"Wait a minute-"

"-you will not wander around the compound-"

"Hold on a sec-"

"-and you will listen to all orders given to you." Hijikata finished, folding his arms across his chest. "Is that clear?"

And wow, Mio had this sudden urge to slice that infuriating look off his face (if she ever gets hold of a knife). She never really liked bossy characters and as a warrior, her pride did not allow her to bow easily. And this Hijikata Toshizo was the epitome of bossy, discounting Araki because in his own right, Araki was on a level of his own.

"Prisoner." Mio said flatly.

"What?" Hijikata asked, irritation evident on his face at not receiving the hearty "Yes, Sir!" he must surely be expecting, and Mio relished in the frustration, however slight, she was able to cause. That'll teach him.

"After killing my parents, you are asking me to remain here as a prisoner in every manner but the literal sense of the word. And the Shinsengumi is supposed to maintain peace and protect the civilians. Is it me or am I missing something here?" The none-too-discreet jab at their mistake and responsibilities was not lost on Hijikata. His eyes narrowed on Mio, mild anger simmering beneath the violet surface.

"The compound is not for you, a female, to roam freely. There are rules to be followed." And tempers to watch, apparently, Mio thought drily.

"Ummâ€|" Chizuru started, and all eyes turned to her. Her voice wavered, eyes averting to the ground, but still, she pushed on resolutely. "Hijikata-san, would it be asking for too much from you to allow Hayashi-san to help with the work around here like I do? And to let her accompany me when I search for my father? After all, her situation isn't like how mine initially was."

Hijikata looked at Chizuru and, to Mio's astonishment, his features gentled the merest fraction, a minute upturn of his lips gracing his features. The changes were slight but noticeable only to those looking closely, and who knew the demon vice-commander was even capable of such an expression. "Well, that is true. You came in with a worse predicament than hers, and you've turned out good. I suppose the restrictions could be relaxed a little."

Chizuru looked up at the compliment, her chestnut-brown eyes wide with surprise, before ducking her head again as her face flushed a rosy pink. Hijikata turned back to Mio -and ah, there was that demon she knew- lips a thin hard line, the barely there softness gone from his face.

So, Hijikata and Chizuru, perhapsâ€|? Interesting. Mio filed this little biscuit of information away in her mind.

"We'll see how things go then," Hijikata told Mio. "Chizuru will show you the ropes, but don't think it will be an easy task staying here."

"Does that mean that we can take her on our patrol rounds too?" Nagakura said eyes glittering, a spreading grin on his face at the prospective increase in female accompaniment, no doubt.

Harada smacked him on the head. "Hey, don't even think of taking advantage of the lady, Shinpachi."

The captain who seemed the youngest -and whom she only know as Heisuke, from what the others call him- grinned cheekily at Harada. "Well, that's what you _say_, Sano, but you are probably thinking the same things too!"

Leaning against the wall, the one Kondo had called Souji was shaking his head, a small smirk on his lips. "I think Chizuru has made us soft." But his tone was lightly mischievous, obviously teasing the now flustered Chizuru.

"Well," Harada said, winking at Chizuru and Mio. "That might not be a bad thing."

Sannan sighed. "I guess that waits to be seen."

And that was it. It had been nerve-wrecking and might have shaved a few years off her life just sitting in the same room with them while they contemplate on her fate, butâ€|

Amid all this laughter, all the acceptance -some grudging, some welcoming- in giving her the opportunity to try and find her place among the Shinsengumi, Mio could not help the idiotic smile breaking on her face.

She'd passed the first hurdle. _Alive_.

End
file.